

L. RON HUBBARD



Fifty-Fifty
O'Brien

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

Fifty-Fifty O'Brien

THE coaster dip roared like HE shells in a barrage. The merry-go-round wheezed and banged soulfully and the cymbals clanged and the horns blazed away and the horses went up and down and the kids shouted.

The freak show barker delivered his hoarsely nasal spiel, never varying, never ending. The popcorn seller bawled his wares and the peanut roaster squealed with a shrill monotony which went through your head like a knife.

People shouted, people laughed. The hum of the midway went on and on, its pulsation an electric shock which made you breathe hard with excitement. The roulette wheels whirred and the trained seal barked.

And above it and through it went the *yap, yap, yap* of .22 rifles, hammering away with gusto at the mechanical ducks which swam and dived, and dived and swam, on their endless chain. Water geysered, bells clanged, lead whacked through clothespins, splinters sang.

And behind the cartridge-covered counter, on the muzzle side of the chained rifles, stood a young man with straw-colored hair and eyes that flared like gaslights. He was yelling to be heard above the racket, above the clang, above the showering tinkle of empties. He was hazy in the smoke and dust, but his voice was sharp and clear.

“C’mon, step right up and winnah a ceegah. Winnah a ceegah. Winnah baybee dawl. Two bits for fifteen shots. Heresy a your chance. Heresyachance. Anybodeee can do it. Right this way, step right up.”

Over and over. *Crack, crack, crack. Clang clang.* And the ducks and rabbits jumped up and went down, over and over again.

From the next booth, the grifter leaned out and yelled, “Hey, Win! Hear ya leavin’ us.”

“Yeah. Gonna join the Marines.”

“Whatsa matter? Doncha like it?”

“Wanta see some excitement for a change, thasall.”

Crack, crack, crack, the pungent smell of smokeless powder and dust and the buzz and clang and clatter of the crowd, the merry-go-round, the coaster dip, the people, the radios, the people, and *crack, crack, crack . . .*

Silence.

Nothing moved.

Brooding, festering jungle steamed unheard as it had for centuries. Vast, empty silence like a wall which roared and roared and hurt your ears. Tense, festering jungle—nothing else.

For a long while Winchester Remington Smith had been standing at the top of the trail, staring down through the twilight tunnel which was the trail. His sodden khaki, mud-spattered and torn, blended in with the tan and red of the muck in the path. His campaigner was faded, wavy from rain and sun, and his leggings were the color of Nicaragua.

Somewhere ahead he had heard a sound. Ten minutes ago he had heard it. And he stood there, waiting, ears smarting with silence. In his hat he carried a few sheets of onionskin paper—orders for Company K. And the paper had to get through.

To push back that still wall which pressed in against him, he muttered, “The only difference between me and a telephone wire is that they patch a wire and bury a runner.”

Bitterness marred his voice. For three months he had been at it—carrying orders, stamping alone across mountains, through angry yellow streams, down steep-sided, silent ravines.

And he was under orders to avoid trouble, to get his messages through.

But God, what a relief it would have been to send Springfield lead into a goonie’s guts. Sometimes, when he crept alone through the sullen night, he almost went mad with the desire to fire a clip at the silence. Anything to break the tension before the tension broke him.

Perhaps, this time, when he got back to Company K, the top kick would let him stay around long enough to get himself back again. But Company K hardly knew him, and neither did “Fifty-Fifty” O’Brien, first-sergeant USMC. And if Fifty-Fifty O’Brien didn’t even see him, then what chance did a fellow have in getting a break?

Fifty-Fifty O’Brien. He’d like to know that man. Fifty-Fifty O’Brien was solid. He didn’t let a thing like silence get him. Fifty-Fifty O’Brien was the toughest man in the regiment. Self-reliant, big-jawed, swashbuckling, with a

killer's eyes—pale, icy eyes that stared straight through you and out the other side and saw something you couldn't see.

Fifty-Fifty O'Brien and his small black horse—the only black pony in the regiment—were always found in unexpected places. O'Brien had the idea that he himself could bring this guerrilla war to an end.

A faraway click of a hoof, faint in all this stillness, came again to Win Smith's ears. He moved the rifle a fraction of an inch, glanced down to make certain that the safety was off.

His pale, haggard eyes bored down through the leafy tunnel, and he crouched a little forward, waiting for he knew not what. The fact that something besides himself was moving in this vastness heartened him, made him forget the silence for a moment. Something was moving in the steamy heat and silence and it might spell danger.

He could hear the hoofs more distinctly, he could even see a shadow moving through the patterns of sun upon the path. Then he wanted to shout with relief. A black pony was coming toward him—and a black pony meant O'Brien. Maybe he'd have company during the last ten miles.

He started to call out a greeting, but the word clung in his throat, a sodden lump. O'Brien was not on the horse. The rider wore a straw hat, a ragged white shirt, a pair of leather puttees.

A goonie! On the black horse!

Where was O'Brien?

A creak of leather and a startled wheeze from the pony, a swift white flash of amazed eyes, the blur of a hand moving to the boot for a mountain gun.

Win Smith dropped down and the shot screamed over his

head. The rifle jolted his shoulder, shaking the jungle with its crash.

The native jerked in the saddle, clawed at the horn, and came sliding out. The black horse, nostrils flared, charged up the trail toward Win Smith. He snatched at the bridle, caught it, and dragged the pony to a snorting stop.

Very slowly, very watchfully, he went down the red clay path toward the sprawled lump of white. For an instant he was afraid he had missed and killed the native, but the pale flicker of an eyelid gave him assurance. He knelt down and propped the goonie up against a tree trunk.

"What's the idea?" said Win Smith. "*¿Que pasó?*"

"*¡Yanqui!*" spat the goonie in a spray of blood.

"*¿De donde viene el caballo?*" demanded Smith. "And where is the *yanqui* who rode it?"

The sullen brown jaw was tightly set, the eyes were flaring with anger. "*¿Quién sabe?*"

"You know and you're going to tell me about it. If you don't, I'll . . . I'll . . ." He felt in the pockets of his soggy shirt and found a box of matches. He struck one and looked at the goonie's feet. Then he knelt and began to remove a muddy leather puttee.

"No!" screamed the native. "No! I have heard what you do. I know you would torture me."

"That's better," said Smith and put the matches back in his pocket. "Where is this *yanqui*?"

"We wounded him. He is now on his way to our camp."

"What for?"

"He knows much, he is a great man. We would break him

with certain means and obtain much knowledge. I went to bring other men.”

“Which trail?” said Smith.

“One kilometer back, the trail to the left. But,” added the goonie with a sick smile, “they have gone far, you can do nothing.”

Smith stood up and looked back along the path. The native was right. He could do nothing about it now. In fact, it would be better if he did nothing. His orders were to the point. He had to avoid any such trouble. The orders were more important than a single man. The best he could do would be to tell them at camp and let the patrol take care of it.

But it was ten miles to Company K and in the meanwhile . . .

“One kilometer,” said Smith. “I can see their tracks, anyway. I can make sure . . .”

Fifty-Fifty O’Brien, the self-reliant, the swashbuckling O’Brien, caught like a rabbit in a snare. O’Brien was too swell a guy to leave in a spot like that.

“One kilometer?” He took out a cigarette, shoved it in the native’s mouth and lit it for him. Then, looking down into the puzzled brown eyes, he added, “They’ll be finding you soon enough. You won’t bleed to death.”

He swung up on the black pony and went on down through the sun patterns which leaked into the dense tunnel. He wasn’t listening to the nerve-twisting silence now. He had something else to think about.

He found the trail, found the tracks. Several ponies had passed that way at a walk. He put a fresh clip in his Springfield and whipped up the black horse and left his own trail.

The path led into a country cut and slashed by ravines, the

forerunners of the Yuloc Mountains. As it went gradually up, the vegetation became less thick, the trees bigger and further apart.

An hour and a half later, he slowed the black pony's pace and began to look ahead each time he went over a canyon edge. And then, about five hundred yards away, he caught sight of white dots moving along a ravine bottom.

The trail there was long and straight, and from his position high above, Smith could command the entire length.

He dismounted and spread himself out on top of a limestone boulder. He adjusted his sling with neat precision, as though he was again on the firing line winning his expert rating all over again.

Seven white dots, he counted. One horse seemed to have no rider, until he made out the khaki lump which was draped like a meal sack over the saddle. If that was O'Brien, the man might well be dead.

He could almost hear the whir of the chain taking the ducks along their ledge. He could almost hear the *crack, crack, crack* of yapping .22s and the clang of the bells and the whistle and thump of bullets. He grinned down the sights and squeezed carefully.

A white duck pitched over on its side and out of sight. Another threw up its arms and toppled backward. The echo of the shots roared and pounded through the close canyon walls and the reports were curiously hollow out in the open this way.

Another mechanical duck jolted, almost fell, and then clung hard to a terror-stricken horse and bolted out of sight, just as though the duck was alive.



He grinned down the sights and squeezed carefully.